

## Montgomery police union puts pressure on County Council

Leventhal calls for council to act 'like grown-ups'

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County's police union continues to put pressure on members of the County Council, staging a protest at one of their homes this week and asking for copies of their schedules.

Now, Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park is calling for other members of the council to stop picking a fight with the union.

"It's time for some of us to start acting like grown-ups," Leventhal said.

He said the council's leadership, which includes Council President Valerie Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring and Vice President Roger Berliner (D-Dist. 1) of Potomac, should work with the leadership of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 35 — not antagonize them.

Tension with the union, which represents the county's police officers, escalated May 26, when more than 50 officers staged a protest in the council chambers in Rockville, as the council unanimously passed the fiscal 2012 budget. On Wednesday, officers protested at Ervin's home in Silver Spring. The police union also has filed at least five requests for information from county government this week, including council members' schedules and salary information.

Ervin, a former union organizer, was not home at the time of the protest.

On Friday she called Leventhal's comments disappointing and said council members have acted with grace and class during the passage of the budget.

Police officers who attended the May 26 protest said they were angry over the council's decision to increase the amount the officers pay toward their health care and retirement benefits.

Leventhal said an officer at the protest who shouted that police would not respond if council members called 911 became angry only after Berliner called for Ervin to receive a standing ovation for her work passing the county's budget. Leventhal called Berliner's actions gratuitous.

"We passed the budget," Leventhal said. "It's our job. We do it every year. It's time for the council to stop patting itself on the back."

Berliner said Friday that Ervin deserved a standing ovation for her work and said the action should not have inflamed the relationship with union leaders.

"If he didn't want to stand up when Roger (Berliner) asked for a standing ovation, he could have sat down," Ervin said of Leventhal.

Berliner described the council's current relationship with the police union as testy, but said that should not be confused with the council's relationship with rank-and-file police officers.

"This has nothing to do with our respect and appreciation for police on the beat," Berliner said.

Leventhal said he stands by his vote for the county budget, but said its passage was made more difficult than it needed to be by other council members.

"The County Council should not appear to be on the warpath," he said. "I'm not with that program."

At the May 26 protest, nine people dressed as clowns -- intended to represent the nine members of the council. One clown wore a name tag that read "Valerie." Police union president Marc Zifcak would not comment Friday on whether the union had anything to do with the clowns.

"Everyone seems to think we did," he said.

The council has asked Police Chief J. Thomas Manger to inquire whether any of the officers at the May 26 protest were on duty at the time. Ervin said this week that she is unsure who made the request, but that her office was not involved. She also said that all nine members of the council were concerned.

Leventhal, however, said he was not one of them.

"I've been called much worse names," he said. "Someone dresses like a clown and I'm supposed to get rattled. I'm a big boy."

Leventhal criticized reports that the council will consider legislation soon that would alter disability retirement and collective bargaining rights for police officers — both of which are opposed by the police union.

Zifcak said Friday that the union might organize additional protests, but he did not say where.

He also declined to say what the union planned to do with council members' schedules and other information the union has requested.

"We are exercising our right to obtain public information," Zifcak said. "We don't even need a reason to ask for this information. We want it."

Among the requests was an inquiry into any complaints made by a government employee, including council members, regarding "any statement, comment or duty status of any tax-funded employee in attendance at any County Council session or meeting for the period from January 1, 2002" through Thursday — the date the request was made.

The union also made a request Friday for the names and dates of hire of all elected and non-elected members of the Montgomery County Council staff.

Another request by the union May 25 — the day before the budget was approved — seeks information about salaries, bonuses and other compensation for all Montgomery County Council and legislative branch employees, including council members.

Berliner said he was unsure why the police union wanted his personal schedule.

"In my five years (on the council) it's the first time a request of this nature has been made," he said. "It's highly unusual to say the least."

Jane A. Milne, the union secretary who made the requests, said she has been requesting public information from the council and the county executive's office for years.